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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: IRANIAN PRESIDENT VISITS DAMASCUS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons  
1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Shortly after his noon arrival in Damascus, visiting Iranian President Ahmadinejad met January 19 with Syria's President Asad and later in an expanded session with Asad and Syrian and Iranian officials. Regional media reports previewing the two-day visit suggested that bilateral and regional political issues would be discussed and economic agreements signed, but no specific information was available as of late afternoon local time. A Syrian political analyst said that while Syria and Iran were using the visit to demonstrate solidarity in the face of Western pressures, the two countries differed in their long-term goals. Ahmadinejad wanted to conceal his inability to solve domestic Iranian issues, while Asad was using the specter of growing regional Shiite influence to pressure the Saudis not to meddle in Syrian and Lebanese affairs. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrived January 19 in Damascus for a two-day visit. He traveled to the Presidential Palace where he met in a short session with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and then in an expanded session with Asad and Syrian and Iranian officials, according to our contacts.

¶3. (SBU) Regional media reports previewing the visit suggested that bilateral and regional political issues would be discussed and economic agreements signed. Journalists were invited to the Ministry of Information at 0800 to board a bus to the Palace for an afternoon press conference, but at the end of the day it seemed increasingly likely that public remarks or a communique would be delayed until January 20. No schedule for the visit has been released, and an AP staffer repeated an Iranian Embassy official's remark that the schedule would be developed during the course of Ahmadinejad's stay. The AP staffer also repeated reports Ahmadinejad might visit the Omayyad Mosque in central Damascus and the Sayda Zeinab Mosque, which is a Shi'a pilgrimage site, on the outskirts of Damascus. Ahmadinejad is also expected to meet prominent Syrian businessman Sa'eb Nahas, a Shiite with numerous ties to Iran, according to one of Nahas' associates.

¶4. (C) Syrian political analyst Sami Moubayed told Polchief that while Syria and Iran are both using the visit to demonstrate their solidarity against Western pressures, the two countries differ somewhat in their long-term goals. Ahmadinejad is using the visit as a public relations stunt to conceal his inability to deliver domestically, Moubayed said. The Iranian President is betting that the US is too preoccupied with Iraq and fearful of Iranian influence there to press the Iranians too hard, Moubayed said. Meanwhile,

Syria is using the visit and the optic of a burgeoning alliance with the "Shiites" to serve notice on the Saudis, who are afraid of rising Shiite power in the region, not to pressure Syria too hard on Syrian-Lebanese relations and on Syria's participation in the UNIIIC investigation. In Moubayed's view, however, the alliance between the two countries is short-term and tactical.

15. (C) Other analysts say that Syria also wants to remind the U.S. that it has dangerous friends and that it still has cards to play to regain the Golan Heights and retain its interests in Lebanon. These analysts express concern, however, that Iran is the more powerful partner in this alliance and that Syria may get dragged into Iran's fights with the West and damage its future prospects for better relations with the U.S.

16. (U) Ahmadinejad was accompanied by Iranian FM Manouchehr Mottaki; the Minister of Housing and Urban Development and the head of the Iran-Syria Joint Economic Commission Mohammad Saeedi-Kia; Iranian government spokesman Gholam-Hossein Elham; and Presidential Advisor Mehdi Chamran, according to Iranian media. The Iranian President was met at the airport by Syrian FM Farouk Al-Shara'a; Minister of Higher Education Hani Murtada; Minister of Economy and Trade Amer Husni Lutfi; Syria's Ambassador to Iran Hamid Hassan; and the Iranian Ambassador in Damascus Mohammed Hassan Akhtari.  
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